



Investment Concept: Pacific Higher Education Partnerships Investment

Start date: May 2026	End date: September 2030
Total proposed DFAT funding: Up to AUD\$22million (TBC)	

Development Context (What is the problem?)

- › A significant, highly educated and skilled workforce is essential for productivity and national leadership, promoting social cohesion by strengthening civic discourse and supporting free speech and informed public debate.
- › In Australia, the Government has set a tertiary education attainment target of 80 percent of working aged people by 2050. Tertiary Gross Enrolment Rates (GER) in the South Pacific are, on average, below 15 percent tertiary participation¹, with many below five percent (noting some gaps in available data).
- › As the higher education sector in the Pacific evolves, regional approaches remain beneficial. National tertiary institutions vary in their size and composition; they do not all offer an array of degrees that meet national workforce requirements. In recognition of their importance and the opportunity to leverage Australia's world-class tertiary education sector, this Investment Concept Note proposes a regional investment geared to enhancing the breadth and depth of partnerships between Australian and Pacific tertiary institutions.
- › Australia's International Development Policy sets a goal that 80 percent of new investments will have a climate objective by 2028-29. This investment is well placed to contribute to the achievement of that goal, noting the importance Pacific places on climate change in its regional policy statements.
- › Australia's International Development Policy also stipulates that new investments over \$3m in value must include a gender equality objective and this new investment is expected to have a specific gender objective as well as to integrate Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) throughout the program.

Strategic Intent and Rationale (Why should Australia invest?)

- › This investment seeks to mobilise and leverage the Australian tertiary sector, including financial and in-kind resources, to magnify the impact of Australian Government investment in broadening and deepening partnerships between Australian and Pacific tertiary institutions.
- › A strong Pacific tertiary education sector is fundamentally in Australia's national interest and responds to Pacific priorities. Strengthening the capacity of Pacific tertiary institutions to deliver high-quality education, including conducting independent research to influence policymaking in PICs, advances Australia's International Development Policy objectives of effective governance, economic resilience, security and stability in the Pacific.
- › The 2050 Strategy for a Blue Pacific Continent captures the agreed long-term development objectives for the Pacific region. This investment seeks to support the strategy's vision that all Pacific peoples are assured access to education, and its acknowledgment that strengthening scientific and evidence-based policies and programs that draw on Pacific indigenous knowledge is a pathway to achieving that vision.
- › The investment will contribute to the achievement of outcome 4.2 of Australia's Pacific Regional Development Program Plan (DPP) 2025-2029: 'Expanded education and employment pathways and opportunities for Pacific students throughout the region.' The proposed investment is anticipated to advance all four DPP objectives: a strong and united Pacific family; regional action on climate change and disasters; sustainable and resilient economic development; and wellbeing, inclusion and equity.
- › A successful investment in higher education partnerships would see: more Australian universities engaging with Pacific counterparts, including potentially through consortia or peak body engagement led by the

¹ Many Pacific Island countries have a GER below the 10% average for low-income countries and some have a GER significantly less than 5%. Lack of data is also contributing to these low rates.

program delivery partner. This engagement would be responsive to Pacific priorities, and would engage with risk appropriately. Pacific stakeholders would report a greater sense of agency and ownership for the research agenda and perceive that the program is responsive to requests for capacity building in Pacific tertiary institutions. Research to policy links would be strengthened, enabling research to more deliberately inform current policy debates. Conferences would involve more policymakers, in addition to academics, with formats promoting exchanges between academics and policy makers. Australia's investment would be more visible, with Pacific tertiary institutions and policymakers acknowledging our contribution.

Proposed Outcomes and Investment Options (What?)

The proposed goal, objectives, 'End of Program outcomes' (EOPOs) and 'Intermediate outcomes' are indicative only and would be tested and refined during a comprehensive design process.

Program Goal: A peaceful, stable and prosperous Pacific equipped to respond to the challenges of our time².

Program objective: To better equip Pacific researchers and tertiary institutions to produce the research needed to solve Pacific development challenges.

Proposed End of Program Outcomes

EOPO1 (Individual capacity building): Pacific researchers (including women and people from disadvantaged groups) are better equipped to lead, drive and undertake high quality, policy-relevant research.

EOPO2 (Institutional capacity building): Pacific universities and research institutions are better equipped to manage and drive high quality and locally relevant research agendas, including participating in research networks and supporting diverse researchers.

EOPO3 (Regional partnerships): Higher education and research partnerships between the Pacific and Australia are strengthened, expanded and more sustainable.

EOPO4 (Communications): Pacific research and analysis is more effectively communicated, including to policy makers and diverse Pacific and Australian audiences.

Cross cutting Intermediate Outcomes

IO1 (GEDSI): Women, people with disability and other disadvantaged groups have greater opportunities to lead, participate in and determine research priorities within the program.

IO2 (Climate): Researchers and institutions undertake climate-focused research on Pacific-relevant challenges.

IO3 (Localisation and sustainability): Pacific Islanders have opportunities to shape the research agenda, through inclusive and culturally appropriate consultation.

IO4 (Partnership): Pacific researchers and institutions benefit from collaboration, networking and knowledge sharing arrangements with a broad range of Australian higher education/research institutes.

Implementation Arrangements and Delivery Approach (How will DFAT deliver it and engage?)

- › We propose an open, competitive Aid Grants process to select a grant recipient for investment design and implementation, in which the implementation phase is contingent on the successful delivery of a design document meeting DFAT conditions. This enables DFAT to draw on the expertise of an Australian tertiary institution to articulate how best the sector can meet strategic objectives by leveraging existing forums and peak bodies in Australia, increasing ownership through a partner-led design, and maximising the strengths, systems and processes of that partner.

² Regional Development Partnership Plan 2025-2029.